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IRA's Provos carry U.S. Armalites

BY JIM MANN

Washington Bureau of The Sun

Washington—Last year, an American investigator went to Northern Ireland and was astonished to hear a popular song called "The Armalite."

The song had been commercially recorded by a group called the Wolf Hounds. Its chorus, making the rounds of the pubs, went as follows:

*"It's down on the Bogside,
that's where I long to be;
Lying in the dark with me
Provo company;
A comrade on me left and
another one on me right
And a clip of ammunition
for me little Armalite."*

For those who don't know, the Armalite is not some new flashlight battery or a kind of baking soda. It is a high velocity, semi-automatic rifle, similar to the M-16 used by American soldiers in Vietnam. One of its selling points is that it can pierce armor.

The Armalite sells over the counter in American gun stores for about \$250. It has become, in the past five years, the primary offensive weapon used against British soldiers in Northern Ireland by the Provisional wing of the Irish Republican Army (or, as the song calls them, the "Provos").

British officials believe there is a direct connection between those two facts. Increasingly in recent weeks, they have come to blame some of their troubles in Northern Ireland on IRA sympathizers in the U.S. who take advantage of relatively liberal American gun laws to obtain weapons and ship them abroad.

On December 18, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson told a group of American correspondents, "Most of the modern weapons now reaching the terrorists in Northern Ireland are of American origin—possibly as much as 85 per cent of them."

Three weeks later, on January 8, Stanley Orme, the British minister of state for Northern Ireland, dropped all the qualifications and said flatly at a Washington news conference that 85 per cent of all weapons used by the Pro-

visional wing of the IRA are of American origin. Both Mr. Wilson and Mr. Orme also alleged that the IRA is buying its arms with money sent by Irish-Americans.

As evidence to support their alarm, British officials point to a series of at least 13 different court cases in this country in recent years in which various persons have been convicted of trying to buy, sell or smuggle weapons directly or indirectly to the IRA.

The biggest of these prosecutions took place in 1974 in Baltimore, where four men were sentenced to six years in prison each after they were found transporting 70 Armalites from Baltimore to New York.

These British allegations are of no small significance. In the past 6½ years of violence in Northern Ireland, more than 1,400 persons have been killed and an estimated 10 times as many persons have been injured.

What is to be made of the British claims? An examination of the available evidence including interviews with various officials suggests that not too much weight should be given to the 85 per cent figure used by the British. Nevertheless, the arms traffic from America to Northern Ireland does appear to be substantial.

Whether anything can be done to stop this arms traffic is another matter. Even officials responsible for cutting off the flow of arms often say they are skeptical that they can succeed in doing so. And several officials admitted that, even if the "American connection" was cut off, the IRA's Provos would be able to obtain arms elsewhere. (The Provisional IRA has received support from a variety of sources, including Libya's mercurial Col. Muammar el Kadhafi.)

No American official could be found to confirm, or even say he believed in, Mr. Orme's assertion that 85 per cent of all IRA weapons come from America. And one American official provided figures that appear to contradict Mr. Orme's assertions.

Donald Zimmerman—the official of the Treasury De-

partment's Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Division (ATF) who gathers intelligence on American involvement in illegal gun smuggling to the IRA—said data provided by the British show that 4,500 firearms were seized or confiscated from the IRA from 1972 through 1974.

Of these 4,500, Mr. Zimmerman said, the data show that 31 per cent were manufactured in the United Kingdom, 26 per cent in the United States, 10 per cent in Germany, and the rest in various other countries. Mr. Zimmerman said he had no reason to believe the pattern has changed drastically since the study was carried out.

Mr. Zimmerman is one of several American officials who have traveled to Northern Ireland to study the situation. On a trip there two years ago, he said, he was shown the weapons that the British had and was "totally unimpressed." A number of the weapons appeared to be older guns, and some had homemade improvements on them, he said.

In addition, Mr. Zimmerman said, many weapons listed in statistics as being "of American manufacture" do not actually enter Northern Ireland from the U.S. Rather, they are American-made guns that left this country long ago and have been circulating on the world market. The IRA Provos might, for example, obtain such weapons in Africa or the Middle East.

It is possible that 85 per cent of the so-called "modern" weapons in the hands of the IRA come from the U.S., Mr. Zimmerman said. But it is also possible that the modern weapons are only a small fraction of the IRA arsenal, and that for now the IRA is not buying modern weapons elsewhere.

"The best gun that they had," Mr. Zimmerman says, "was the AR-180"—that is, one version of the so-called Armalites. Previously published reports have suggested that the IRA is using another, similar Armalite rifle called the AR-180. Mr. Zimmerman these reports

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1 RAs From PROBS CARRY US ARMALITES.

appear to be incorrect.

By the end of 1975, Mr. Zimmerman said, the British had seized only five AR-15's from the IRA but at least 150 to 200 AR-180's.

Last fall, a confidential Defense Department security study, released by Representative Les Aspin (D., Wis.), said the IRA was acquiring or stealing weapons from American Army bases for eventual shipment to Northern Ireland. But Mr. Zimmerman says no evidence has turned up to support this allegation, and no advanced U.S. Army weapons have been found in IRA hands.

The AR-180's are manufactured in Japan by a California corporation. According to Mr. Zimmerman, about 2,000 to 3,000 have been sold in this country.

Intelligence officials believe the IRA attempted to purchase large numbers of Armalites in an effort to avoid the chaos of having too many different kinds of weapons with too many different kinds of ammunition. "The IRA attempted standardization, and they went to the AR-180 that can be bought by a private citizen at his local gun shop.

Under federal law, most

persons (convicted felons and other dangerous persons are excluded) can buy as many guns as they want, so long as they can prove residence in the state in which they are buying the weapons.

However, it is against the law to turn weapons over to a resident of another state, or to transport weapons on a bus, train or plane without informing the owner or operator that one is doing so. It is also illegal to export guns out of the country without a license from the State Department.

In other words, the gun laws are loose enough to enable Armalites to be purchased from American gun dealers, but tight enough so that persons who try to smuggle the Armalites out of the country to the IRA can be prosecuted.

And there have been successful prosecutions. In the Baltimore case, government witnesses testified in U.S. District Court that four men—Henry Hillick, James Conlon, Francis M. Larkin and Kieran McMahon—conspired together in the purchase of 158 Armalites and more than 10,000 rounds of ammunition for shipment to Northern Ireland. One government witness said

Hillick told him the guns were bought to "pot the dummies"—to kill British soldiers.

The Baltimore case has been the largest to date in terms of a single arms shipment. But the government currently has pending in Philadelphia a case in which five Irish-Americans have been charged with conspiring to smuggle 378 rifles and 140,000 rounds of ammunition to the IRA over a lengthy period of time.

Both American and British officials appear to be watching the Philadelphia case very carefully. It is the first time that anyone has ever been prosecuted under an obscure federal statute that makes it illegal to act as an agent for "a body of insurgents within a country with which the United States is at peace... without prior notification to the secretary of state."

Despite such prosecutions, the gun-running goes on. In odd places, at odd times, through luck or an occasional tip, American and British authorities run across weapons shipments.

At the British Embassy here, Jonathan Davidson, the first secretary and the man responsible for Northern Ire-

land, admitted in an interview that new developments in transportation, such as containerized shipping, make it extremely difficult to detect arms shipments.

But British and American officials are going to great lengths to stop the flow of arms. In Washington, both the Justice Department and ATF have men specially assigned to a "task force" to deal with violations of American law stemming from IRA-related activities.

Mr. Zimmerman, ATF's coordinator of domestic intelligence, who would naturally like to portray the American effort as successful, says, "We like to think the activity [related to smuggling to the IRA] has diminished, particularly in the past year." But he adds, after a pause, "Of course, there has been a truce in the past year [in Northern Ireland]."

There have been signs that truce is ending. Early this month, 10 Protestants were killed by terrorists on a bus in County Armagh, Northern Ireland. Soon afterward Mr. Orme said, "preliminary evidence" showed the weapons used in that attack came from the United States.

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